

CHAPTER ONE

Hannah waited exactly seven minutes before touching Mae's cold body.

Earlier that morning, Hannah had watched from the doorway as Mae massaged olive oil into the frayed ends of her hair, so heavily flecked with white. She'd watched the woman's arthritic hands gingerly stopper the bottle of olive oil.

Mae had noticed her looking and cocked an eyebrow. "The sun's getting on," she'd chastised, "and you've done nothing yet with your day. Go bother Doug for some mint and limes and I'll fix us something sweet."

Hannah had taken her time. She'd let spectacled Doug clasp his chest theatrically at the sight of her, and she'd smiled as he slid the too-ripe limes and a glossy, glazed Satsuma orange tart into a paper bag. She'd felt Doug's

fatherly eyes on her back as she walked away from the shoddy fruit and vegetable stand he'd built in front of his house. Then, unable to resist the potent mix of pastry and fresh citrus, Hannah had waded down through long grass to the water and eaten slowly on a sun-warmed rock. All those minutes, and Hannah hadn't felt it happen.

By the time Hannah walked through the front door, Mae was coughing.

"What's wrong?" Hannah cried, kicking off her shoes as she dropped the bag of limes. She rushed to help the woman into her chair.

Mae struggled to speak as she gripped Hannah's hands between hers. Her eyes were wide and her throat worked furiously. "I'm sorry," she wheezed. "I tried."

"For what?"

"Listen, girl," Mae began urgently, then was silenced by another convulsive fit of coughing. Her face was flushed, her eyes bloodshot. "I want you to go." The coughs turned her voice ragged.

"Go where?" Hannah asked, as she thumped Mae's back.

Throughout Hannah's life, Mae was always trying to keep her home, keep her close, but now she practically hissed, "Run."

"I'll get you some water," Hannah said, and hurried into the kitchen.

Something sharp pricked her foot and she noticed a broken glass, roughly swept into a corner of the room. As she ran the faucet, a shiver danced down her spine. A candle was lit in the windowsill, and the wick was almost spent.

"Mae?" she called out, setting down the glass of water.

Silence.

“Mae,” she said, more quietly, and inched into the living room. Mae was slumped in the chair, her hands limp on either side of the armrests. Hannah hurried toward her. “Come on, Mae,” she urged, shaking Mae’s shoulders. The woman’s head rolled back and forth with each movement. Hannah settled Mae’s head back against the chair and ran her hand in front of Mae’s face, as if polishing a mirror. There was no breath. She held her palm to Mae’s chest and felt a horrible stillness.

Sensation drained from Hannah’s body as she retreated to the couch. Her hands trembled in her lap as she tried to calm her breath. She felt paralyzed, not knowing what to do and unable to guess. So she sat.

Hannah watched time trickle around the carved wooden face of the living room clock, already knowing that Mae was dead, but relishing the moments when another possibility still seemed to exist. In waiting, all things were possible. She fixed her attention on the slants of noon sun that stretched themselves toward Mae’s feet. The arches of her feet faced each other, fallen open like two dark halves of a cracked nut. “Mae?” she pleaded again, weakly.

Ten minutes would have been too much. Ten minutes would have been a long time to live with, later.

Hannah rose unsteadily from the couch and carefully put her pale palm over Mae’s neck, covering all the veins still and tight as clothespins. There was no pulse, but she thought she felt something bunched just above her clavicle. She slipped one arm under Mae’s neck and hugged her tightly for a second, then began to sob as Mae’s head sagged when released.

Through her tears, Hannah noticed the line of copper Mae always wore around her wrist. She ran her finger over the nine small knots along its length. There was no clasp. “For protection,” Mae had told her when Hannah asked about it as a small child. She’d been drawn to the flash of burnished orange.

“Protection from what?”

“There are plenty of hungry spirits aching to take a bite.”

Hannah had snorted, holding up her own bony arm. “A bite of who?”

Mae hadn’t answered.

Carefully, Hannah rolled the bracelet off Mae’s wrist and onto her own. Tears fell down her face faster than she could wipe them. She couldn’t stop touching Mae as if life could be lent that way. Finally, she stood, realizing she would need to call someone. She turned to go, then stopped to spread the hem of Mae’s apron, patterned with big, alert sunflowers, down over her knees.

In the kitchen, Hannah dialed the police and felt her heartbeat quicken. What would she say? She placed her hand over the receiver’s mouthpiece, as if she could read instructions in its Braille. But some instinct took over, answering the questions posed by the police operator. She spiraled the phone cable around a finger and sniffled. “Natural causes, I think.”

“You’re all alone up there now, child?” the operator asked, her voice gentle, and Hannah was startled by the words. All alone. She heard a man’s voice, raised in shock, in the background.

Captain Gabour came on the line. “I’m sorry, Hannah.

She was a fine woman, your mother,” he said, his voice garbled. Calls into town were always hollow and distorted, as if they were whispered down a pipeline and carried through echoes. Hannah imagined Keith Gabour at the other end, his face pitted by a beaten bout of prostate cancer. “I’ll get someone to you as soon as we can.”

Hannah scratched under the table to draw Graydon’s attention. The cat was pawing at Mae’s ear, and Hannah fought a wave of nausea.

“Do you need anything, sweetheart? Food or supplies?”

Hannah looked around the kitchen, at Mae’s racks of spices, at the hanging basil plant that swayed lightly in the breeze by the window. Her new reality wasn’t sinking in. Something in her resisted the corrosive realization that Mae wouldn’t be coming back.

“I’ll come in with the officers to make arrangements,” Hannah heard herself say. “Thank you, Keith.”

Hannah hung up the phone and listened to the heavy silence. She walked into the living room and carefully covered Mae’s body with the patterned afghan that had been her favorite. The outline of her face through the thin wool was a stranger’s, and Hannah stared so long at it that she almost convinced herself that the blanket rose above the slump of her mouth.

“Come on, kitten.” She nudged the cat, coated in matted gray fur and close to his last breath, with her toe. Hannah slammed the screen door on her way outside, and slumped down on the back porch stairs, her jacket loose over her shoulders. She drew her knees to her chest as Graydon purred curlicues around her feet.

It would be a long wait, she knew, so she closed her

eyes. Almost immediately, her ears picked out a rhythm in the pulsing hum of the water. It seemed to massage her limbs into a dumb listlessness. The sun was harsh overhead despite the early December chill, and sweat trickled down her spine, reminding her of Mae's tickling fingers. The only family she'd ever known, gone.

Hannah didn't move until the boat's horn scythed the quiet.

"Coming in," a man yelled. James Robichaud, a dark-haired man, several years older than her, who had once pinned her arm against a chain-link fence during a street festival in town. "I know who your mother is," he'd hissed, cherubic cheeks flushed. "Your real mother."

"I do, too," she'd answered, maneuvering her keys between two fingers in her pockets with her free hand. "And I know what she can do."

A trembling fear in his lip, slight as a plucked string, and her bruised elbow had been dropped. He'd left her alone since, and over the years, his expression had turned from hostility to something akin to curiosity.

Now he stood above her with two men flanking him, a trooper insignia pinned to his shirt. He was nimbus-lit in afternoon sun. "She's inside," Hannah said. "I haven't moved her."

James cleared his throat, and gestured to the two men in medical response uniforms. They carried a stretcher with them. "How'd it happen?"

"She's sixty-eight. Too young, but something gave out, I guess."

James tongued a cigarette out of a crumpled box, then jabbed the pack down at her. She pulled one out and tucked

it behind her ear. "I'm sorry, Hannah," he said, and she detected real remorse. "The Captain said she'd had trouble with her heart for years," James added, and Hannah remembered seeing Captain Gabour in their living room, dressed in a deep blue cotton suit jacket and holding a planter of irises like they were his beating heart. His eyes misty as he regarded Mae.

Hannah imagined that she could hear the sounds of a stiff body being positioned in the body bag, and she shivered under the meek sun.

"He said you'd be coming back to town with us. I think we'll have some questions. You know, completely routine stuff," James said.

Hannah looked up at him, cringing. "I don't really like the water, so try to take it smooth." But James's gaze was focused on the house behind her. She read barely schooled fascination on his face. Hannah turned away as Mae's body was wheeled past.

Hannah felt her stomach heave. "I just need to use the bathroom." She barely made it, then collapsed over the toilet. Only sourness dribbled out. Graydon pushed the door open and sprang up onto the edge of the tub, casually licking a paw.

Dizziness swept over her as she stood and washed out her mouth. It was tempting to lie down on the cool tiles. Her body felt leaden, and some small part of her still expected Mae to barrel in, a cool peppermint-scented washcloth in hand.

One of the men knocked on the door. "Everything alright in there?"

"Just a minute," Hannah called. In the mirror, her

wan reflection stared back at her. Her fear made her look younger than her twenty years, as though she was some baby bird cast out of the nest and made to fly.

Hannah wondered if she'd had the same uncomprehending expression as Mae choked before her, and if Mae had recognized that she'd be no help. Something Mae had said tried to surface in her memory of that moment, but Hannah could only remember her own dumb hands, frozen in her lap.

The first time Hannah became aware that Mae would one day die, flu-ridden, feverish Mae had stripped off her dress without closing the door and Hannah had seen loose skin and gouged muscle, always there but expertly tucked beneath collared shirts and thick fabrics.

“Lord, I’m dying,” Mae had moaned as she fell into bed.

Hannah had carefully placed the cup of steaming lemon tea on the bedside table. “Shall we bury you in a St. Louis Cemetery? Next to that old voodoo queen, Marie Laveau?” Hannah teased.

Mae’s mouth had tightened. “Don’t you dare, child. Just heat me up and scatter me somewhere nice, away from the swamp. Pick some sunny spot that I’d like to haunt.” Hannah felt sick to think that she’d laughed at that. She fingered the knotted copper around her wrist.

Outside, James was crouching on the dock, a fresh cigarette dangling in his hand. “Ready?” he asked. The men dropped their playing cards when they saw her, and one of them moved behind the boat’s steering wheel. Graydon edged back from the dock, hissing at the water.

The boat wobbled as Hannah stepped in, and she immediately curled up on the ledge, tightening her red

jacket around her body. The lowered stretcher lay a few feet away from her, and she was grateful at least that Mae was shapeless inside the zippered body bag.

Hannah tried to focus on a nick in the wood. As a child, she'd always drifted off to sleep by looking into the darkest corners of her room and imagining what might be crouching there. Beyond the edge of the boat, bald cypress trees formed a lattice. Their knees, directly above their roots, had always unsettled her. They looked like too-big onion bulbs rising from the water.

At first, the water was murky and clogged with tree roots, but soon they broke into a river and the sky was reflected on its glassy surface. Broken tree trunks lined the riverbed like ossified sentries.

One of the men settled in beside her with his cap over his face. Soon, the only sounds were his snoring and the whirring of the motor, and above them, somewhere, a faint warbling.

James's firm hand on her shoulder startled her awake. The freckled skin of his nose was splotched with wind-burn, and she wondered if her own cheeks were peeling already. "Sleeping in a boat if you've got seasickness is a bad idea, but you looked like you needed it," he said.

Hannah rubbed her eyes. Mae's body was already gone. She took his offered hand to dismount from the boat and murmured a weary "thanks." Even the solid ground felt moveable beneath her feet.

"We'll take you back home when you're ready," James said. "I guess you'll stay in town tonight."

Hannah started. The blessed fogginess began to retreat in a hurry, and thoughts galloped in its place. Where was

home? “Not sure yet. I guess so. I haven’t really thought about it.”

“That was your mother’s—that was Christobelle’s house?” James asked, and Hannah had the sense that he was speaking carefully.

“What does it matter?” She sighed as she looked over her shoulder, at the long channel of placid water behind her, dotted with light green moss. “I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

Hannah could count on one hand the number of times she’d spoken to her biological mother.

On her ninth birthday, a grim-eyed Mae had packed Hannah’s chubby form into a sundress, then nodded tight-lipped at a strange man who’d helped them aboard a boat and steered through the shaded waters. Once they’d reached their destination, Mae averted her eyes and said, “Off with you,” shoving her gently onto dry land. Mae had settled back into the boat, tightening the shawl across her shoulders.

Her mother had been waiting for her, her hair shorn, a light dusting of stubble like a rose-colored halo around her head. A tall man, thin as a reed, stood beside her.

Christobelle had cocked her head and inspected her daughter. Hannah had the sense that she’d never been seen so thoroughly. Her past, her future, and the meager secrets of her present, all bared.

“Hello, child,” Christobelle said in a low voice, and Hannah flinched. Christobelle stretched out a hand imperiously. Hannah hesitated, unsure whether she was meant to kiss it, then presented a tight, resentful fist in return.

“Your hands are so warm,” Christobelle murmured. Hers felt cold and pocked as a stone. “I forget sometimes.”

Hannah pulled back her hand and glared pointedly at the man. He licked his white-flecked lips.

“That’s Samuel,” her mother said. “Not your father, child.” One long finger hooked under her chin, pulling her head up sharply. “He’s a partner of a different sort.”

Samuel and Hannah stared at each other, the man’s impassive expression betraying nothing. Below the brim of his hat, his cheekbones jutted like stone bluffs.

“What about you, child?” Christobelle had asked, her cold hand tracing Hannah’s jaw.

“What about me?”

Christobelle smiled, revealing ground-down nubs of teeth that didn’t quite meet. “Tell me, Hannah, do you ever see things that others don’t?” Christobelle’s eyes had reminded her of reptiles watching from the verdant dark. Hungry.

Hannah had muttered “no,” but in her room, as she tried to fall asleep, she would see the doorknob turn back and forth slowly, although there were no shadows in the clear light under the door. She glimpsed things out of the corner of her eyes, men and women standing still and slack-jawed in the grocery store or out on the street. But when she whipped her head around, they’d be gone.

Walking through town one evening, she’d watched a fire hydrant expand into a hunched figure, but a blink brought it back. Living in the swamp, it was the sort of thing that might be called “having a second sight,” but Hannah knew that elsewhere it would just mean “crazy.”

“Hannah?” James’s voice brought her back.

Hannah added, “She’s as much a stranger to me as she is to you. I haven’t seen her in at least a decade.”

James weighed her words, and nodded. “Well, that’s okay. Mae’s already with the, uh, coroner. We can get you started on funeral arrangements.”

“I want to see her,” Hannah said suddenly, a desperate edge to her voice. “One more time.”

He cleared his throat. “If you think you’re ready, we can go take a look.”

She nodded, then walked ahead, absentmindedly running her hand over the candy veneer of a red truck. A churning returned to her stomach, fear and desire grappling. It was the feeling she got whenever she came into town. The promise of other people her age telling secrets, and kissing under slitted moons. But it was a promise never made to her. It’d been years since she’d stood on a playground, listening to taunts of “Red Rover!” in the distance. Years and years since she’d been shoved against lockers, and struggled as a lit cigarette hissed to embers against her skin, strong arms holding her in place. All because of her mother.



The coroner had a quick gum-chewing jaw. James introduced them, and she immediately forgot his name. “Looks like a massive stroke,” he told her, fidgeting. He had the panicked eyes of someone unaccustomed to conversation. “Natural, by my estimation,” he added to James, whose hand hovered politely near his face, never quite clasping his nose shut.

“Are you sure?” James asked, and Hannah looked at him in surprise.

The coroner folded down the white sheet. He tapped two fingers steadily down Mae’s stomach. “There’s something here,” he said, massaging a slightly swollen area on her belly.

Hannah stepped forward and touched Mae’s stomach. It felt like a bad bruise, gathering momentum to grow beneath the skin.

“And here,” the coroner added, his gloved hands roughly moving Hannah’s to another bloated area. When his fingers brushed the copper bracelet that now wound around her wrist, he flinched as if scalded. Hannah had spent so long with Mae’s superstitions that she’d forgotten about other people’s.

“Could be there was a small tumor metastasizing. Living out where you do, you don’t exactly come in for regular check-ups. We could know for sure if you wanted her opened up.”

Hannah blinked back tears as she nodded slightly, and James made a small, chastising sound. The coroner simply said, “Sorry,” in the flat voice of someone who didn’t know or care what he was apologizing for.

It wasn’t the words that upset Hannah, but the way this man touched Mae, as if testing a melon at the market. Still, Mae’s stomach held Hannah’s eye. Unbidden, an image of a bird’s nest camouflaged in the moss came to her mind.

“We’ll just take a quick poke around,” the coroner said, as Hannah nodded. “You’ll be wanting a cemetery burial?”

Mae’s toes peeked from under the white sheet. Hannah

still struggled to understand that she was dead. “Who do I speak to about cremation?”

“That’d be Manny Ardoin and his wife. They run a little funeral home.” Hannah blinked and then Mae was covered. “James can take you down.” The coroner let out a long breath and gripped the steel table with both hands as he wheeled her into a corner. His work was done.

“I’ll be right out,” James said, and she felt his hand on the small of her back, acute as a bee sting. It propelled her down the hallway and back out into the afternoon sun.

The street was mostly empty. The trucks that shuffled in and out of parking spots could’ve been alligators, gliding through the water. The twang of a steel guitar floated out of a bar, and a curly haired girl in an oversized denim jacket winced under the weight of a laundry basket.

Hannah crossed the street to the corner store, and heard a bell ring as she stepped into the shop. She moved through the stacks, idly touching candy bars and bags of chips, before pulling open the cooler door in the back and holding a cold can of orange soda to the back of her neck.

The teenage boy behind the counter had a sweet smattering of pimples on either side of his nose. “I haven’t seen you around before,” he said.

“I live on the swamp,” she answered, and placed the can onto the counter. “Or I did.”

“You’re moving into town?” His hopeful brown eyes plumbed the neckline of her buttoned jacket.

“My mother just died,” she said, and her heart skipped a beat. It was the first time she’d spoken the words.

His face fell, and he pushed the can back across the counter. “Shit,” he whispered. “I’m sorry. It’s on the house.”

“Get back, Rodney.” An older man appeared out of a back room, and snapped his fingers. “Now.”

The boy, Rodney, smiled hesitantly at Hannah. “I’m with a customer, Dad.”

“She’s no customer of ours. I said now, boy, or do you need me to pull you by your damn collar. And you,” the man added, glaring at Hannah, “should leave now.”

Hannah held up her empty hands. She’d never mastered the art of bracing herself against people’s anger. “I’m just getting a soda,” she said, trying to smile.

The man nodded stiffly. “You’ve got it.”

Rodney rubbed his neck, his wide eyes moving back and forth between them.

Through the window she saw James, shielding his eyes against the sun as he searched the street for her. “Right. Thanks.”

The bell rang on her way out and she heard Rodney say, “Take care.”

James waved her over. “I can take you over to Manny’s now if you want. Or are you hungry?”

“I couldn’t eat,” she said, honestly. She opened the can of soda and took a sip. The orange was too artificial, the sweetness unnatural. “I want to go home.”

“Are you sure? There are just a few things that need to be taken care of. And besides, you’re all alone out there. Shouldn’t you stay here for a while?”

Hannah wondered whether he worried for her or his investigation, and shook her head. “Tell them to cremate her and send me the bill. If there’s a will, just have them open it and call me with the details. I want to go.”

“Hannah,” James said softly, “it’s just a few more hours.”

“No,” Hannah said firmly. Her shoulders hunched forward and she was aware of the people half-hidden on the streets. A pair of women huddled in the shade beneath an awning, their bespectacled eyes squinting at her. How many of them knew who she was? How many of them had entertained thoughts of harming her? “Please. Have someone take me back. They have the body. They can do the rest.”